

Performing the Psychosocial: An enquiry into forgetting

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The core of this paper is the text of a performance I gave at the first conference of the Association for Psychosocial Studies at UCLAN in December 2014. It begins with some introductory thoughts to set the scene, then comes the text of the performance and then some additional reflections developed after the event. As such, the paper takes the form of a performative essay.

In the conference session I wanted to explore whether the psychosocial might be examined through the practice of performance. The first conference of a fledgling association seemed a good place to see if such an approach might work and besides the conference call invited proposals that addressed the arts and experiential approaches. My performance was in an experiential slot. What could I lose?

I set out to create a more open experience than is normally found in an academic conference. I presented no empirical data or new angles on theory, rather, a series of observations and readings, more redolent of a poetry reading or wandering in a gallery than a conference presentation. In keeping with a psychosocial perspective, my intention was to hint at ways of learning and knowing beyond rational, cognitive, consciousness, but nevertheless still located in the academy. I wanted to rid myself, and the corner of the conference we were in, of the drive for mastery and correction, of 'review' even, so important to the academy. Was it possible to present something imperfect that was still worth receiving?

I was picking up on Christopher Bollas's 'theory of reception' (1992, p. 73): the unconscious as a place of received as well as repressed ideas, on the creative work of the unconscious to make connections between interior and external worlds. I drew heavily on others' writings to explore this intermingling of inner and outer and the places in-between. And following this vein of 'reception', the poetry of Rilke – his 'true receivers' – was also an influence (Paterson, 2006, p. 35).

The theme was forgetting and loss: a meditation on forgetting, where the performer forgot her lines. A meditation on forgetting not as an obstacle to reaching some other better place, but as a state in and of itself, as an enlivening way of being. It was an exploration, within the frames of performance and the psychosocial, of the actual experience of forgetting. I was, if you like, taking the psychosocial researcher's reflexivity into the conference room (Brown, 2006). I wanted to unsettle our organised states of conference minds in favour of something more raw and vulnerable, something that was rooted in a desire to write poetry rather than conference papers. I was looking for a consciously embodied scholarship, a work of the imagination as well as cognition where ideas and form are linked. It began with reflections on loss and grief because forgetting is felt as a loss and because in grief forgetting is longed for and feared.

Was this a performance simply because I said it was, because it *felt* like a performance, because I did things for affect? All the presentations at the conference were performances: they were coded behaviours with rhetorical strategies and demonstrations of skill to an audience. But my performance was more so. I was conscious of a doubling (Carlson, 1996, p. 5): observing myself at one remove from my habitual self. I had a heightened awareness of the audience and the spaces between us and what might happen in that space. And there was some artistry. There were elements of reportage but my intent was primarily to present an exploration of my self and others in the here and now moments of our time together.

The transformative potential of performance, according to Jon Mitchell, occurs when the theatrical and the everyday come together; when performance is neither separated as a distinct activity from the rest of life nor expanded into a metaphor for action in everyday life (Mitchell, 2006, p. 398). My performance contained both these things: the *theatricality* of some of my gestures and the close attention I paid to the space in which we met took place within the *everyday* performativity of a conference presentation.

I hoped to convey some ideas but I wanted the audience to have an emotional as well as intellectual experience, one more akin to an artistic event or the experiential learning of the Tavistock tradition (Armstrong, 2005; Sapochnik, 2015), than the prescribed experience of an academic conference. I like to think it bore something of what Denise Riley refers to in her summary of the performative as: 'an utterance which in itself brings about something by virtue of being voiced in the apt situation' (2005, p. 4).

My aim in this preamble is not to introduce a theory of performance and the psychosocial, rather, to pull you, reader, into my work process, as was the aim in the performance. The development of a more theoretical analysis of the potential of performance for psychosocial studies and indeed the contribution of psychosocial studies to performance studies remains to be done. Such a work might start with Kear's identification of 'the affiliations and correspondences between the two fields' of psychoanalysis and performance (Campbell and Kear, 2001, p. xiii). And it might endeavour to explore the dynamic between the pragmatic elements of what I did (which perhaps lie closer to psychosocial aims) and the artistic, the latter being stressed by those who see in performance a means of re-considering our being in the world (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 6). For the time being I leave you with the text (only slightly edited) of what I did.

The passages which begin '*Recite*' were recited from memory, sometimes haltingly.

Text of 'Performing the psychosocial: An enquiry into forgetting'

Introduction

At the launch of the Association for Psychosocial Studies Paul Hoggett (2014, p. 194) called for other practices besides the academic, the political and the clinical to engage with psychosocial studies. This performative essay proposes that performance is a practice that might be added to the psychosocial repertoire.

I've brought along some books to help me.

Perhaps they'll act as ballast for my creaky self

Whilst I try this out.

Lay them on the floor, alphabetical by author, nose to tail, in a sweep.

Armstrong, Auge, Berger, Bion, Bollas, Butler, Butler, Frosh, Hesford, Macfarlane, Milner, Riley, Rose, Rossetti, Sebald, Winnicott

There are five parts to this piece, and many voices - some are my own, some belong to others.

1. In the night or, *the point of this address*
2. *Once in childhood* (John Berger)
3. The work of forgetting
4. Performing the psychosocial
5. The end

Part 1. In the night or, *the point of this address*

In the night of the 19 October 2014 I woke, rolled to my side, and I knew the grief had drained down into deeper fissures. It settled there whilst these thoughts slid into its place.

Thoughts about Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*, and his search for a form to enact his subject (Macfarlane 2012; 2014). In the night, he walked out into the snow that had just begun to fall and made tracks. That's how he began his walk into his book. He found the form to enact his subject: elisions of foot, snowflake, track, word. *My subject is forgetting.* The desire to forget and the desire to remember; the haunting by the lost object. A sudden young death, a predicted very early death, and a foul neurodegenerative illness.

I rolled to my side and with the grief drained to the deeper place, I started again. The solitary preoccupations of grief eased ever-so-slightly into a preparation for this public address. My losses reveal an inordinate tie to others and '*that these ties constitute what we are.*' (Butler, 2004, p. 22). That's Judith Butler's thought. And maybe this deep knowing of the ties, and of the 'transformative effect of loss' (Butler 2004, p. 21) makes it alright to be here now saying this to you. Because this grief I feel for those already lost to me, and imminent losses, alert me to the ties I have with you. For performance is about noting that I am here and that you are too. Both a preoccupation with myself and an awareness of you others. And whilst my losses are caused by accident, illness and chromosomal error, I dare say they link me in some ever-so-slight way to the human condition of loss from political violence, and in so doing they prompt me to align myself with Butler's question of 'what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war' (2004, p. xii).

What might be made of grief in this public address?

Denise Riley's poem, *A Part Song*, is about the death of her son:

Recite

She do the bereaved in different voices
For *the point of this address* is to prod
And shepherd you back within range
Of my strained ears; extort your reply
By finding any device to hack through
The thickening shades to you [...]
Won't you be summoned up once more
By my prancing and writhing in a dozen
Mawkish modes of reedy piping to you
– Still no? Then let me rest, my dear. (Riley, 2012) (emphasis mine)

But I cannot rest.

The point of this address, of my address, is to make something. It was suggested to me recently that I should memorise a text I had written and recite it. I thought this was a daft idea – I was bound not to remember it. But I was provoked (Hollway and Froggett 2012) and the paradox is that I was drawn into being a performer because I didn't believe I could ever be such a thing. And I placed this suggestion that I perform alongside other elements of forgetting that I'd been thinking about. For I forget a lot these days - those who have died and the names of hellebores. Some people around me are forgetting considerable amounts because of changes in their brains. And there are the hauntings, the desire to forget and the shame of being forgetful.

I will stay in the moments of forgetfulness. My hunch is that solace or Denise Riley's 'rest', might be found in the fissures that open in the act of forgetting. I am not seeking a remembering, an easy redemption that reassures through the promise of a solution, but a glimpse of what might be there in the forgetting. Forgetting is necessary and inevitable. This isn't recovery or an uncovering of historic experience, it's discovered experience.

For the point about grief is that there isn't much to be uncovered because it's new - there hasn't been time for the snow to fall. (You will notice though that there are many attempts to escape the new by dwelling on the past.) The most recent loss hasn't happened before and whilst it is a reminder of ancient losses, there are mostly new sensations to be articulated. In fact, the re-telling of one's love and how she was lost, is too much to bear. What's bearable is the present newness, the immediate moment and its hopefulness, for it isn't all dreadful. Which perhaps explains the paradox of the bereaved saying it's unbearable and yet bearing it.

There is then the telling of an experience to a listener and the being in an experience with a listener. In performance the two things happen, or maybe it's three, a telling, a listening, a being together.

Part 2. Once in childhood (John Berger)

Jacqueline Rose says

'The task of psychoanalysis is not so much to undo forgetting but to put poetry back into the mind.' (Rose, 2003, p. 7)

Not to dig down and recover the forgotten but to make something. And this links to Christopher Bollas's theory of reception: 'The idea of a receptively derived unconscious, as partner to a repressed unconscious' (1992, p. 73); that some ideas are invited into the unconscious 'as acts of self enrichment' (1992, p. 74). This is quite obvious, isn't it, when you think of dreams?

I want to read a piece by John Berger. It's called 'Once in childhood' and it's from his book *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos*.

'Being comforted after crying. The bellows in one's stomach stop blowing. A still sweetness, like liquid honey, accumulates in the chest. Only the roof of the mouth is still sore. The inexplicable cause has inexplicably vanished.

The inability to remember is itself perhaps a memory. One lived with the experience of namelessness: there were certain elemental forces - heat, cold, pain, sweetness - which were recognisable. As also a few persons. But there were no verbs and no nouns. Even the first pronoun was a growing conviction rather than a fact, and

because of this lack, memories (as distinct from a certain functioning of memory) did not exist.

Once one lived in a seamless experience of wordlessness. Wordlessness means that everything is continuous. The later dream of an ideal language, a language which says all simultaneously, perhaps begins with the memory of this state without memories.’ (Berger, 1984, p. 31-2)

The point is there was a time when forgetting was not possible and so did not matter.

Part 3. The work of forgetting

This performative essay does not delve into cultural or political forgetting or the physiology of forgetting. It starts from my own forgettings and those of others near me. Why are individual acts of forgetting felt to be failings and what is the problem that the rush to remember seeks to obscure?

Marion Milner’s book *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) is a study of creativity. Milner says that any attempt to make something new, to create ‘what has never been’ (1950, p. xiv), requires powers of perception which come from a merging of inner and outer reality, a managing of one’s terror of the unknown (1950, p. xiii). And perhaps, most pertinent for me now, there is a need to bear the ‘uncertainty about what is emerging long enough’ (1950, p. xiii) to allow it to emerge. And Winnicott suggests that trying too deliberately can interfere with playing and the value of ‘relaxed undirected mental inconsequence’ (1988 [1971], p. 128).

Towards the end of *On Not Being Able to Paint* Milner writes about the need for a child to have ‘a place for absent-mindedness’ (1950, p. 163) in order to go ‘forward into living’ (1950, p. 164). It needs to be able to confuse ‘me’ and ‘not-me’. Absent-mindedness isn’t quite the same as forgetting but I think it is still relevant here. Anna Freud explains that it’s about conscious logic and reason being ‘absent from one’s mind’ (Milner, 1950, p. xiii). This indeed is my experience of forgetting – it’s absurd to forget something one knew one minute ago only if one holds fast to a notion of a reasonable mind.

Jacqueline Rose considers a poem by Christina Rossetti called *Introspective* which refers to events or feelings which are so painful they can't be voiced (2003, p. 6). Rose's question is '... how on earth to give shape and voice to what "one would prefer not to have experienced, [what] one would rather forget"' (2003, p. 7). The power of Rossetti's poetry is that it offers glimpses of painful things without actually naming them. Such things are then in part forgotten, they are absent from the mind.

Recite from Introspective

I wish it were over the terrible pain,
Pang after pang again and again:
First the shattering ruining blow,
Then the probing steady and slow. ...

Dumb I was when the ruin fell,
Dumb I remain and will never tell;
O my soul, I talk with thee,
But not another the sight must see. (Sisson, 1984, p. 68)

I'm drawn to Rossetti because of this hinting. She hints at an all-too-painful remembering. Of course I want to know what she is referring to, but there is comfort in the suggestion that it doesn't have to be named. She devised forms without revealing too much of the drive to do so.

I decided to learn her poem *Goblin Market* (1986 [1862]). It's very long but I went with the instinct that this is the poem I wanted to know by heart. I was taken by the idea of knowing something once and for all, possessing it, perhaps to make up for the mis-rememberings. On the page, *Goblin Market* looks like a complete thing. If I could only memorise it I might master a completeness and thereby find some solace in omnipotence. As I memorised it I didn't read ahead, the idea was to not know it until I knew it. And I didn't read literary criticism about it or find out any more about Christina Rossetti. All I know of it so far is an ominous long list of fruits and of maids being lured to buy them.

Don Paterson says he wrote his version of Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (55 Sonnets to Orpheus) in order to have a rhymed English version that he could memorise and carry around in his head (Paterson, 2006). Following a painful conversion to historical materialism he says he 'sought some text I might get in my head as a vade mecum, whereby I could simply remember what I now held to be most true' (2006, p. 66). At first I thought my motivation for memorising was more prosaic than this: to find out what happens when I forget, not what I hold to be most true, but words, just words. But of course the two cannot be separated. Words are what I have to help me remember the lost ones, and their traces.

Recite Goblin Market

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
"Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck'd cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,

Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy.”

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bow'd her head to hear,
Lizzie veil'd her blushes:
Crouching close together
In the cooling weather,
With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
“Lie close,” Laura said, (Rossetti, 1986 [1862])

Why not tolerate forgetting and enjoy the space to breathe that it relinquishes? Attempts to remember, to re-gain mastery, are attempts to slough off the unsettlement of not knowing. Perhaps I'll invent something called 'negative spontaneity': an unwelcome spontaneous act of perceived negativity, but one that holds a potential for insight.

Part 4. Performing the psychosocial

Performance is about both recalling and inventing experience (Hesford 2013, p. 19). You can think about it in different ways: anthropologically as ritual acts; managerially as outputs; artistically as theatrical acts or performance art; sociologically and philosophically as self-presentation, the creation of identity. It has been theorised as a means of creating a gendered identity with the body as a performative subject rather than material object. Whether ritual or dramatic, performance is about the creation of presence and such presence alters states of

mind and social relations (Mitchell, 2006, p. 384). As a theoretical category it brings attention to culture and society as an ‘unfolding rather than fixed reality’ (Mitchell, 2006, p. 384). There is a mixture then of performance as an element of everyday life and performance as an extra-ordinary event. And these ways of thinking about performance allude to their common elements of time, space, body and audience; and the notion of *doing*, something has to be done.

In doing this performance at an academic conference in a university I’m wondering not just what am I doing but where am I? The academy is surely a place where forgetting is shameful; where the urge is to correct, to master, rather than to linger in a place of forgetting. But *the point of this address* is to stay close to the sensations of being here with you; to play with the performative rituals of academic conferences. To be here.

In the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler is almost apologetic for its academic stance. She says of the book:

‘it was produced not merely from the academy’ (1999, p. xvii).

For it also came, she says, from the social movements to which she belonged. She goes on to say,

‘... there is a person here’ (1999, p. xvii).

And the book began when she was

‘sitting on Rehoboth Beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life’ (1999, p. xvii).

And, to come to the point of my quoting her, she says,

‘That I can write in an autobiographical mode does not, I think, relocate this subject that I am, but perhaps it gives the reader a sense of solace that *there is someone here*’ (1999, p. xvii) (emphasis mine).

Some small solace comes from her being here, but also that she is *carrying on* (Frosh, 2002, p. 148), carrying on using words to symbolise losses, despite their inadequacy. And her words, like Denise Riley’s, John Berger’s, Christina Rossetti’s, are here to be remembered, forgotten, performed.

Bion warns that within the psychoanalytic space ‘what is ordinarily called forgetting is as bad as remembering’ (1970, p. 41): they both inhibit awareness of immediate sense impressions.

The effort to remember is as problematic in the analytic session as having memories close to hand. The forgotten can be as present as the remembered in so far as one seeks to find it. When forgetting I look for what isn't there, rather than what is. Anxiety saturates the sense impressions that hover in the space of forgetting. So in his injunction against using 'memory or desire', Bion (1970) includes forgetting. If we are forgetting then we are remembering something, and we are, most likely, *trying* to remember, rather than listening to the sensations. In the moment of forgetting there is a shameful, anxious rush to remember akin to 'the irritable reaching after fact and reason' which Bion warns against (Bion, 1970; Keats, 1899, p. 277).

You may note that I have brought my facts and reason with me in these books laid out before us.

You can also think of the moment of forgetting as a potential space (Winnicott, 1988 [1971]) and a space for becoming (Bion, 1970). This is what I'm exploring here now in this performance: the idea of the negative capability of performance. Like artistic activity or the psychoanalytic consulting room, performance creates a different kind of space for thinking. One less saturated by existing knowledge, one more filled with subjectivity; a space somewhat removed from cognitive injunctions to know (Leavitt, 2011). Forgetting and remembering remove me from the present. Performance places me squarely *in* the present.

Another way to think about the space of forgetting is one 'in which thought already was but not yet realized', that one is in 'the presence of the unthought thought' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 27). I'm borrowing here phrases from David Armstrong who in turn borrowed from Bion. One is in the presence of thoughts which have been thought but have then gone away, the thoughts have been realised but then have been ... what? Unthought again? The thing forgotten is known, but cannot be thought (Armstrong, 2005, p. 51). And if the shame of forgetting and the virtues of remembering are dislodged, might imagination get a firmer grip on our minds, albeit with the price of taking us to the ineffable? (Sanders, 2011, p. 97)

The point of this address is to gesture towards the unknown, towards oblivion, to allow the thing that escapes in forgetting to go. Stephen Frosh (2002, p. 152) says 'there is always something which escapes symbolisation' but this thing that escapes can be hinted at.

Performance is about 'hinting'. I have done a little more than hint that it is death that drives this performance: forgetting is a kind of rehearsal for death. To go back to Frosh:

'Speech breaks down, fails at its edges, because something else looms behind it, breathing down its neck and causing shivers wherever it goes.' (2002, p. 153)

This is what happens in the tiny moments of trivial forgetting where, say, I put my glasses, but also when I don't want to remember pain or the brain goes disastrously wrong. Marc Auge writes, 'Memory and oblivion in some way have the same relationship as life and death' (2004, p. 14). In forgetting we go to the edge of a place where there are no more words. What I forget is death, until it moves into my mind and a twitch in my face tells me it's come again

Part 5. End

What does performance add to the academic, the clinical, the political, those other practices already at work in the psychosocial project? Perhaps it 'moves the whole thing to somewhere different' (Riley, 2012). To a place where the state of mind of the performer, the performative researcher, comes to the fore. It provokes an unsettlement. It makes a scene (Hollway, 2014, p. 137). You take the work to another place and it resonates with something that's already there, some hinting practice.

I will end by reading a longish piece from Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (2002, pp.23-24).

But before that I want to glance back at Marion Milner and her thoughts on absent-mindedness, which, she says,

'... requires a physical setting in which we are freed, for the time being, from the need for immediate practical expedient action; and it requires a mental setting, an attitude, both in the people around and in oneself, a tolerance of something which may at moments look very like madness.' (1950, p. 164)

This extract from *The Rings of Saturn* is in a section about Thomas Browne the 17th century physician.

On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark. Knowledge of that descent into the dark, for Browne, is inseparable from his belief in the day of resurrection, when, as in a theatre, the last revolutions are ended and the actors appear once more on stage, to complete and make up the catastrophe of this great piece. As a doctor, who saw disease growing and raging in bodies, he understood mortality better than the flowering of life ... To set one's name to a work gives no one a title to be remembered, for who knows how many of the best of men have gone without a trace? The iniquity of oblivion blindly scatters her poppyseed and when wretchedness falls upon us one summer's day like snow, *all we wish for is to be forgotten.*' (Sebal, 2002, pp.23-24. My italics.)

Gather up the books, slowly, one by one, the pile grows heavier and heavier.

Post script

I first used this device of forgetting in a performance at the Nordic Summer University in Vilnius in 2014. A few months later I took it to a conference about Kate Millett in London. Forgetting was a theme of the conference because, compared to other prominent feminists of the 1970s, Kate Millett and her writings have been forgotten. Some weeks later I happened to see Peggy Shaw in her performance, *Ruff* (Solga, 2014). Shaw had a stroke in 2011 that left her unable to perform in quite the same way as she had been doing for decades. In a discussion after the performance she and her director Lois Weaver talked about 'performing our imperfections'. This of course is what occurs in any good scene of learning: students perform what they do not know and cannot do. What was different in my case and in Peggy Shaw's case, was that there was no rush to hide or perfect or correct. In our moments of actual forgetting we performed our imperfections and also our vulnerability. Furthermore, Shaw was coached from the stalls by Weaver which added a performance of sisterhood (to use a phrase from the 1970s).

But perhaps the ideas about forgetting were simply the tree on which to hang other preoccupations about how I might work in a conference whilst retaining some connection with the uncomfortable sensations provoked by such gatherings: a heightened sense of lack, and of not being able to keep up. Perhaps by bringing an abundance through rich language, through pausing, not hurrying, by conveying a sense that we have enough already to work with, then maybe I could find a richer place to be. In the event I was in a marginal place within the conference and I both longed for and eschewed mastery; I was dogged by a sense that if I could do what the others were doing I would be doing it. Back in 1996 Rosalind Minsky in a commentary on Cixous and Kristeva put it this way:

Both these feminist writers suggest that women should experiment with new ways of structuring experience which have more in common with certain forms of artistic expression than prevailing rationalistic norms. Without the need for mastery and control, these new forms and directions can make available a space for a freer play of the unconscious in the form of insight, intuition and pleasure (*jouissance*) and the expression of those multiple emotions and desires which patriarchal societies have compelled women to disown and repress. (Minsky, 1996, p. 188)

I once heard Maxine Peake recite Shelley's poem *The Masque of Anarchy*. This was a feat of memory where the one and only hesitation in her recall served as a reminder that we were listening to a woman who had memorised the words. The art and virtuosity were enthralling. I was doing nothing like this, quite the opposite. I was demonstrating apparent failure and asking whether it might hold something of value.

I was venturing into a field of *not knowing*. But it wasn't the artist's not knowing: 'a field of desirable indeterminacy within which to work' (Fisher and Fortum, 2013, p. 127). This was *trying* to know, trying to remember, and failing. It did though share the artist's aspiration 'to *retain* something of the unknown within what is produced' (Cocker, 2013, p. 127) or rather, to retain something of not remembering in what I produced.

Unwittingly at the time I was working around the edge of a field of 'performance failure' whereby the imitative representation of conventional performance is eschewed for opening up spaces where the politics of breakdown and of coping might be reviewed (Bailes, 2011;

Le Feuvre, 2010). I *saw* myself performing it before I knew what I would say or do. I was deploying the ‘innate precariousness’ of performance (of life itself) so that failure would ‘not so much haunt it as be consciously deployed in the production of the event’ (Bailes, 2011, p. xvi). I had set myself up to fail and so I had cannily pre-empted any charges of failure. I was proposing a conference practice of revelation – of a fragmented, undeliberate self - rather than a presentation of existing knowledge.

The opposite of Peake in her near perfect preparation and performance was Martin Creed who did no preparation for a talk he gave at a Free Associations conference about psychoanalysis and artistic process (Creed, 2014). (Of course the point of free association is that it isn’t prepared.) One interpretor of what he did said he was ‘waiting to see what will emerge from his mind’ (Townsend, 2014, p. 2). I wasn’t there, but I can only surmise that it might have been refreshing to not be presented with something prepared earlier, but to be a witness as he stumbled along, and was in turns silent and active in the moment. Perhaps it worked because he wasn’t pretending that all was well: a relief to not be told that all is fine when you know quite well it isn’t, that it (life) actually at times feels dreadful.

I didn’t have the courage of Creed to just see what would emerge. I heavily prepared. My idea was quite simple – to learn a text, recite it and see what happened when I forgot some line or two - it *was* simple, but then I prepared and prepared and prepared. What I did share with Creed was a re-arrangement of the usual conference form in order to reveal things about the process of learning. And whilst it would be easy to dismiss his daring as that of a lauded-male-artist-who-can-risk-anything, that would be also to dismiss myself as a woman-who-can-not-do-anything-much.

I was trying to carve out a space in the conference where I could stay more in tune with what-was-really-going-on inside myself rather than adopting a conference stance of sure knowing and academic prowess. It was a re-arranging of a session into something more like play where I might gain a strengthened sense of myself:

‘... by giving form to some previously half-sensed feeling, the aesthetic process gives it a stronger more definite presence on the stage of the self’ (Wright, 2014, p. 18).

This ‘half-sensed feeling’ was that there was something I might do and that there was something for me in this conference (how like a family such things are) but I needed to move the furniture around and use some props in order to act upon its stage with any authority. I wasn’t simply trying to create a comfortable place for it was both comfortable and excruciating: it held intimations of an imaginary idyllic place but one overhung with a threat of embarrassment and failure, or at least a lack of attunement by the audience to my process. There was a hope that perhaps the audience might in some kind of a way reflect back to me something of my experience; that they would know something of what I felt. In the common sense uses of the terms I was operating in both the imaginary and the symbolic. My hope was to use poetic language to present an experiential form of work in a conference. The knowledge in the books that I spread on the floor was safely contained between the covers and could be returned to. The knowledge I held in my body was not so easily recoverable because it became entangled with all the other corporeal sensations stimulated by the task I’d set myself. All this went on within the charged atmosphere of an academic conference, albeit one whose delegates were attuned to some degree with the workings of the unconscious.

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